

Making a Public Difference in the Ministry of Word and Witness

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Today, the liberating movement of faith and a new cycle of societal change coincide to bring our churches and North American society itself to a turning point. The ecclesial and social situation alike call for a new era of ministry to make a public difference. My presentation will focus on the ethical contours of faithful community empowered by the living Word, and some public dimensions of parish ministry that responds to the Word through social witness.

Discerning the Communal Word in Easter Scripture

The second chapter of the Book of Acts, which figures so prominently in this season's lectionary readings, offers a *kerygma* rationale for repentance, a *koinonia* picture of reconciling community, and a *diakonia* pattern that meets the world. It is a clear guide to "right preaching," hearing and doing of the Word. Peter's sermon (Easter III, Acts 2:38ff) rehearses salvation history and calls all hearers to repent (embrace life in the new covenant), be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and receive Holy Spirit, discern the universal promise, and be liberated from social decadence.

The Easter IV reading from Acts then describes several marks of an authentic believing community at the dawn of the Kingdom: "And they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to community life, to the breaking of bread and to prayers." (2:42) Four marks of the church are: studying the Hebrew Bible and the Jesus story, becoming a caring community, eating at an inclusive table, and praying in the liturgical tradition with fresh spiritual perspective.

Luke paints a picture of Christianity as a way of life together in society. His is a learning church that studies theological themes of the prophets and apostles in building its life. It is a trusting community of real people sharing the common life--spending enough time

together to know each other's needs. The Pentecost church also breaks bread together in homes, and shares food in the spirit of the Lord's Table. Moreover, it is a praying church which regularly celebrates the socially empowering Kingdom meal. In Acts, "Sacrament rightly administered" is a joyful liturgy that empowers covenantal praxis.

Becoming A Reforming/Transforming Church

This four-fold way of being church characterizes early Christian witness to God's loving justice in the world. If we would experience a fairer, more abundant, joyful human community, our covenant life must also involve these same elements--instructed faith that has scriptural depth, caring intensive fellowship, coupled with significant sharing, and prayerful worship in which people freely participate.

There is also a fifth mark of an authentic church: it lives into the table feast by practicing communal economics congruent with covenant teaching and the Kingdom vision. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." (2:44-45) Two chapters later we are told, "And no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own.... There was not a needy person among them." (4:32,34) The church in Acts deliberately tries to fulfill the covenant obligation that there should "be no poor among you." (Dt. 15:4) Empowered by God's grace, and with vital hope in God's reign, the faith community shares basic resources--first possessions, later some work.

This fifth mark of an authentic church--featuring practical ethics of economic justice--was prominent for centuries of Christianity until the Constantinian era. Most of the church "Fathers" *assumed* that sufficiency and sharing are requisite for faithfulness. Ambrose of Milan said,

God created all things to be the common good, and the land to be the common possession of all. Thus nature begat the common right, and usurpation begat the private.... When you give to the needy, you do

not give to the poor what is yours, but rather return what is theirs.

This economic justice imperative has been reasserted by radical Reformers throughout church history, and now the New Reformation has the same impulse, giving priority to norms like "Enough is better than more"; and "The basic needs of the poor and powerless have priority in social policy." Love of earth and people pushes personal practice and social policy toward a solidarity ethic that seeks *sustainable sufficiency for all*.

What we discern here is the historical interplay between church reform and social transformation. Ecclesiology was of great ethical significance then, and it is again now. Today, we are working our way through a basic paradigm shift in defining the life and mission of the church itself, thanks to the ecumenical impact of liberation theologies--Black, Latin American, Feminist, Asian--and Creation Spirituality. Liberating reconciling spirituality is expressed in faithful social analysis, in mature patterns of covenant living, and in coalitional forms of community action to serve human well-being on a thriving planet. On that path, pastors, congregations and church bodies can become more consistent with biblical views of the church.

There are three great biblical images which suggest a potent trinitarian *ethic of being church*. Each generation of church leaders and members is called to comprehend afresh these images which provide a faithful onlook toward praxis.

The *first* potent ethical image is "People of God," whom Acts calls people of "the Way," and I Peter, a "royal Priesthood, God's own people," chosen to be a redemptive blessing for the nations by becoming and remaining a humane, just community. People of God are slaves liberated from Egypt and delivered into covenant service, only to become stiff-necked people who go into exile. People of God are the flock whom God shepherds despite rulers who merely feed themselves.

The *second* potent image of the church is "body of Christ." The main import of this theological metaphor is

not ontological, as dogmatic history would have it, but ethical, as Paul so obviously intended. The apostle wants us to "discern the body"--the egalitarian and community building effect of Jesus' presence among us. The organic reality of the body is expressed today in basic Christian communities and in other confessing, witnessing forms of the church.

The *third* potent ethical image of the church is Communion in the Spirit. It leads to a spirituality of justice and peace that prays, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth," and therefore practices gracious inclusion, distributive justice, and ecological *shalom*. In II Cor. 8:4 Paul calls the collection for the poverty stricken in Judea "the communion of service" (*ten koinonian tes diakonias*).

As the ecumenical community of faith today develops vital ethical self-understanding consistent with those biblical images of the church, it approaches a New Reformation. This New Reformation, like the original Protestant Reformation, is not one event but a process of decades. And like the earlier reformation, it is powered by people rediscovering spirited meanings of the Word for public life: particularly that the ministry of Jesus embodies God's loving justice, revealing the Creator Redeemer's intent to deliver all who suffer injustice and who live in solidarity with the poor. The negative side of that message is "No salvation apart from the disregarded." Grace is still prominent in New Reformation bible study and preaching, but theology shifts ethical ground from love-idealism to justice-doing.

Meeting a New Situation

Practical social implications of responsible faith for personal and congregational life today are suggested in a workbook which developed collaboratively under my editorial guidance, entitled *Shalom Connections* (Alternatives, 1986). It explores basic aspects--common gerunds--of ordinary living, and asks how our worshiping, learning, consuming, conserving, eating, playing, sharing, offering, advocating, empowering can help to achieve "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" (the WCC Vancouver Assembly theme). That is only one example of ethically

focused Christian mission that is responsive to the need of our times. A focus on lifestyle helps churches become alternative communities of character that are an "exhibition of the kingdom."

Becoming a community with alternative lifestyle habits, however, is only one side of ecclesial praxis. The other side is to engage societal problems and to influence social policy choices for the sake of human freedom and fulfillment. Both lifestyle change and policy reform are necessary to make a significant public difference. To meet the near future, we North American Christians are called to faithfully and effectively participate in transformation of community, work and politics. We are only beginning to see how to foster humane conditions and civility in these public arenas.

In speaking of a new situation, I refer not only to the coincidental formation of reunited Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations, nor merely to the recurring tug of war between progressives and conservatives that intensifies during any ecclesiastical reorganization. I want to emphasize a pivotal cultural and political occasion, marked by fresh yearning for economic justice and peaceful foreign policy, and awareness of our society's obsolete operating assumptions: e.g., the mistaken idea that more growth is good, when more of the same is worse for everybody; or the view of nature as a mine from which we can extract whatever we need to serve immediate greed, or a sink in which we can deposit any kind of waste, or a factory in which we can manufacture convenient environments. Outmoded ideology and policies have gone beyond dangerous limits, making the public restless, activating religious commitment to peace and justice. Yet the sins of ideologically impaired officials in the 1980s will be visited on the children, for generations. We face collective reckoning for callous practices and violent policies that destroy community at home and overseas.

People of faith can make a difference in this crossfire of judgment and hope. It is partly up to us whether societal changes will be socially transforming and not just faster. As projected by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the new cycle of historical change began for the United States in 1986. He suggests that twentieth century American

society has gone through thirty-year cycles or spirals of progressive movement and reaction, with each positive period of movement building on the preceding cycle, and generally lasting longer than the time of stasis or reaction. The cycle just completed began with constructive protest in the late 1950s, leading to major policy changes in the sixties, and for the women's movement in the early seventies. Then the cycle moved into its reactionary phase from 1976-86. We may experience the positive thrust of a new progressive cycle well into the first decade of the twenty-first century. It will not be the New Deal of the Sixties all over again; the new thrust for social change is more likely to grapple with accumulated "domestic" problems like community decay, and it may challenge our nation's idolatry of military might. Though the amount of social betterment depends on innovation and pressure, the cycle brings affirmative government back into vogue.

We have a special opportunity at the local, regional and even national level to contribute to social invention that serves genuine covenant values. The timing could not be better. As our country observes the Bicentennial of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, there will be renewed interest in human freedoms and social rights, constructive purposes of government, the public role of religion. Despite overblown rhetoric, collective consciousness raising will heighten awareness of contradictions between national ideals and the realities of decaying community, ecological blight, resurgent racism, sexism, and economic greed. Meanwhile, as I have already suggested, the political process may respond constructively to deep social problems, pertaining to health care, basic nutrition, clean water and air, income security, decent housing, better education, and cooperative economic development. It is a time for public witness and ministry.

The ecumenical churches, however, are not yet prepared to play much of a public role in these promising, fermenting times. Too many of our leaders are preoccupied with internal reorganization, or still think and act hesitantly as if it were 1982, and the hard right wing were still in ascendancy. They forget their Protestant duty to undergird humane, civil government and to develop common social ethics as a public form of religion consistent with spirited faith (Calvin).

Developing a Socially Responsible Ministry

Now as we begin another era of social movement and affirmative government, the church in its gathered life and its dispersed ministry must come to grips with big public problems and many hurting people. How shall we respond? I have three concrete suggestions for you as parish leaders: 1) concentrate on one major problem in some depth, 2) pay special attention to the victims of destructive social economic policies, and 3) develop enough know-how and connections to occupy public space on that major issue. In fact these are three characteristic habits of justice-active congregations as I have observed them over the years.

God's call to do justice, love kindness, love enemies, make peace, leads us into careful analysis of key social problems in each locale, opens our ears to the voices of marginalized persons who express real need and hope, and moves us into coalitional activity to change structures. But too often our liturgies and sermons and study groups have domesticating, not liberating effect. Congregations with a privileged social location and homogeneous composition tend to screen out critical social analysis, startling voices of victims, or prophetic ethical vision. Take a good look at the content and process of your education program, the preoccupations of your mission committee, and in worship your prayers of confession, minutes for mission, sermon topics and illustrations, concerns and prayers of the people. Where in the Sunday liturgy--that weekly public battle with principalities and powers--are parishioners challenged with a view from below which expresses judgment and hope? As George Marsden recently observed, "Congregations are so blended in with respectable culture that it is difficult to tell where the Rotary ends and the churches begin."

We who would proclaim the Word of God tend to shy away from a powerful, liberating hermeneutic. In deciding how to interpret biblical passages, our temptation is to make them palatable rather than revelatory of God's loving justice. Such is the perennial dilemma of any pastor who would also be a prophet. Every answer to the dilemma reveals an operative understanding of ministry. What is yours?

Neither you nor I believe that religious life should be relegated to a private sphere of faith or confined to questions of personal morality. But we could fall into another trap--"the church box." Mainstream Protestant ministers and lay leaders like us face a real danger of becoming mere chaplains to, or managers of, timid congregations that adapt anxiously to decaying culture.

During the past 15 years--just when progressive Protestants were losing social power to Right Wing evangelists and Catholic bishops, our seminaries and denominations adopted a reductionist model of pastoral ministry. Not that everyone fell into that pattern, but many accepted the notion that local church ministry is primarily with and for the existing membership of a congregation. As if Jesus never highlighted the larger communal purpose "that they may have life and have it abundantly," or his and our role as shepherds of "other sheep not of this fold." (John 10)

We must refuse to further privatize and psychologize the faith or to circumscribe our ministry. We are called to become public actors who are much more adept as *parish* leaders. We and our congregations are called to a whole, public ministry linking worship-nurture-witness in church-and-community activity. Authentic, wholistic ministry is both prophetic and priestly, as concerned with public affairs as it is with personal relations.

We have been elected--can I use that assertive word here?--and graciously empowered *to make a positive public difference*, despite natural inclinations or church pressures to avoid such responsibility. An authentic doctrine of ecclesial election will evoke socially transforming testimony to and service of the Creator-Deliverer. This divine call to stewardship of the common good has nothing to do with obnoxious evangelists or ecclesiastical authorities who claim to know exactly what policies God wills for this society. Faith *sola gratia* warrants no drawing of direct lines from Bible to social ethics nor does it permit retreat to a religious enclave. "Judgment begins in the household of God" (I Peter 4:17); our own use of power and talents has to change. The point of electing grace is that we are called to share Christ's suffering

love for the world and to walk with the marginated in costly action "for the good of all."

Appreciation and practice of such service is a *habit of socially-engaged congregations*. It is another of ten distinctive characteristics of justice-active parish churches that I identify and discuss in a chapter on theological education for social ministry in a book to be published by Pilgrim Press (Spring, 1988). I have already mentioned six habits:

- 1) Justice-active congregations meet and minister with powerless people.
- 2) They attend carefully to the view from below as they do critical social analysis that makes economic, ecological and community connections.
- 3) In liturgy and praxis, they express theological clarity about the ecclesial and social implications of God's loving justice.
- 4) They usually major in one priority social mission concern, and one significant community-building initiative.
- 5) They utilize connectional resources (denominational, ecumenical, and coalitional).
- 6) Knowing they are "elected" to be different, these congregations view the church's reality in a dialectical-critical way, moving effectively into the gap between what laity conventionally expect of religion versus what the church is called to become as a covenant community. They go beyond personal faith-inspiration to structure opportunities for significant social engagement into all aspects of their life. Sometimes they become self-critical enough to examine innovations that have become routines, and reform again.

Let me list four additional habits that characterize the quality public ministry of justice-active congregations.

7) These rather daring parish churches educate by and for mission. They recognize that learning happens through action/reflection; the church teaches in everything it does. What the church does in common ministry and current mission is educative praxis, and not merely a consequence of biblical theological study. In a vitally ministering church, worship, education, social mission and evangelism are interdependent.

8) Justice-active congregations work on the full continuum of social service-reform-resistance as methods to empower community and societal change. Sanctuary ministry provides a current example. It began *sequentially*, first helping Central American refugees in their immediate need for shelter, food, medical and legal aid; then trying to reform INS practice by calling for just application of the 1980 Refugee Act; then defying the government's attempt to send refugees back to persecution and death. But the strategies continue to be pursued *simultaneously*, and they are likely to remain necessary in response to any justice or peace issue. So it was for the Apostles throughout Acts.

9) Justice-active congregations usually model a mutual ministry reconception of member, officer, and clergy roles. They exhibit a style shift in the way pastors function in partnership with lay leaders and how the congregation's officers behave--not as a board of directors with a chief executive above the fray--but as co-leaders doing ministry.

10) Justice-active congregations develop a qualitative, whole approach to public ministry that encompasses all the modes of parish life. As my book on *Social Ministry* explains in detail, a lively congregation becomes a faithful, witnessing community through multiple modes of ministry developed in creative combination with theological depth and concentrated focus. Basic modes of social ministry include:

- resocialized liturgy, prayer and proclamation,
- communal bible study and other parish education that equips people for ministry in society,
- pastoral care to empower lay ministry, and to help persons deal with the real traumas of social change

- renewal of community ministry through social service and community organization/development
- church involvement in public policy advocacy, and
- institutional governance/corporate responsibility.

The first group of modes has seldom been perceived as social ministry. The second group is not often developed in regular congregational life. The first set of modes needs to be resocialized beyond private and psychological dimensions that have so preoccupied parish pastors and officers. The second set of modes can be reappropriated as "real stuff" for parish ministry along with the first set, not merely as optional for those congregations that may have time or inclination. Justice-active congregations tend to utilize the modes as a *set* in response to any major social concern.

These modes are the "how" of social ministry; through them congregations embody a theology and ethic in the model of God-World-Church, rather than God-Church-World, that in Gutierrez's terms "uncenters" the church to live in history, oriented to the future Christ promises. In fact, we must ask how else believers and congregations meet Christ except by walking with the disregarded (as on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:13-35)? Where else is the Risen One going?

May our ministry of word and witness be congruent with the teachings and deeds of him who is Prince of Peace, Servant of Justice, Embodiment of God, and Brother to us all.